

NURTURE IN NATURE

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*Yazmin, Luis, Maia, Robin &
Heather)*

*Picture 1 - Nurture in Nature in Linn Park,
Glasgow, May 2010 (From left to right:*

1. Introduction

Nurture in Nature (NiN) is a wonderful playgroup based on permaculture principles. It was initiated by Lusi, for her son Robin, in conversation with other parents. The design was simple initially, and grew slow but steadily to its current membership of 42 families.

Herein I describe the designing process using the OBREDIMET model. Appendices include articles written about NiN and a powerpoint presentation about the importance of nurturing our children in nature.

2. Observation

The observation started in 2005 when Robin Wiwa Alderslowe was born. I heard of various groups to take your babies to and really enjoyed the baby yoga classes so went regularly to the classes in Partick. It was the highlight of my week. I loved the stretches, and the cosy chat at the end with other Mums, during which came the sharing of washable nappy and teething tips (etc).

A friend from baby yoga was devastated when her little one learnt to crawl - which is when you have to leave baby yoga - because she felt there was now nowhere for her to go now, for the support that she so enjoyed at baby yoga.

I observed her emotional reaction and considered it as Robin was starting to learn to crawl. I sat with another lady, Lorna, at the end of the class as both our children spent at least 45 minutes feeding before we would fuff about with nappies etc, and generally take ages to move on. Although her son, Finlay was 6 months after Robin, it was clear that she was like-minded, and that we needed another group to attend. And I said "But if I want to be doing anything for my son I want it to be outside, in nature", and she agreed.

Most people seem to think that you shouldn't go outside when it is raining but this doesn't sit right with me. I need my son to go out whatever the weather.

Ecopsychology - there are many quotes on the attached powerpoint presentation made for a human ecology workshop about the importance of being in nature, especially for children. This is all things I read which has inspired me in pursuing this design. It is so vital to our healthy development. I studied ecopsychology as one of the modules in my MSc in Human Ecology and it really struck a cord with me (I had previously studied a BSc in Psychology).

I heard of a person in Fife who was thinking of setting up an outdoor nursery, that would be outside whatever the weather. This eventually came to be the Secret Garden in Fife, who I subsequently contacted, and even visited (did a workshop there).

Further observation: Danny, my partner, knows quite a few other people with young children, perhaps we could start our own group? And so the seed for nurture in nature was sown.

More details about the observation of nurture in nature are in my journal on pages 28-29; 34-5; and 60-65.



Picture 2 - Nurture in Nature harvest, clean & cook potatoes in our allotment (From Left to Right: Luis, Isobel, & Anna's arm)

3. Boundaries

Physical: Mainly Southside of Glasgow, as that is where we live, with occasional trips outside either to the west end parks or to the seaside etc. Probably anyone who lives in Glasgow could attend.

Access to Nature: Some parks are considerably more natural than others, however all might have their place for occasional visits.

Age: no limits on age (for children or parents/grandparents)

Time: Once a week for 2 hours minimum. Charlie works in the afternoon, has to leave about 12pm.

Money: Free so that anyone can attend

Transport: Everything needs to be reachable by public transport, with clear instructions given to all parents.

Weather: For others this might be a limitation, but we believe "There's no such thing as bad weather, only inappropriate clothing."

Ability: There may be difficulties for people with special needs attending, however we haven't had any inquiries to date from people with physical disabilities.

4. Resources

People - we live in Glasgow, where there are plenty of people! Need adults to run the group and children to attend. Parents and children attend together with no leaders.

Money - not a lot of money. Should be free.

Transport - plenty of public transport, from Shawlands to city centre etc. Bus maps. Online bus and train times.

Time - one core parent was only available in the mornings before he started work at 1pm, other were flexible with time - had all day.

5. Evaluate

I evaluated the observation in terms of yields, needs, events, risks, elements, and functions.

5.1 Yields

- ⊗ Strengthen of relationship with own child
- ⊗ Strengthen of relationship of adults with other children
- ⊗ Strengthen of relationship between children
- ⊗ Strengthen of relationship between children and nature
- ⊗ Strengthen of relationship between parents and nature
- ⊗ Reinforcing the importance of nature in a child's life
- ⊗ Freedom to play, climb trees, follow your heart
- ⊗ Children learn that being outside in nature is fun
- ⊗ Education of children
- ⊗ Education of adults (almost a side effect as didn't intend this from outset but has been very important in development)
- ⊗ Sharing of non-mainstream child-rearing techniques (e.g. breastfeeding etc)
- ⊗ Help/Support for Parents

5.2 Needs

In Max-neef's analysis, it meets the following needs:

1. Relaxation
2. Freedom
3. Subsistence (we eat lunch together)
4. Protection (parents are present)
5. Affection (for nature and other humans)
6. Understanding (through education)
7. Participation (as present as a group)
8. Creation (children are very creative in nature, e.g. making a swing out of a branch)
9. Identity (for those who regularly attend)

It thus meets all needs as a synergistic satisfier. This is fantastic and quite unusual, and may explain why this group has been so successful (despite the snow and rain!).¹

5.3 Events

- ⊗ Meeting on site

¹ For more info about Max-Neef's analysis, please see:

www.max-neef.cl/download/Max-neef_Human_Scale_development.pdf

Or you could ask me for a handout which summarises this document.

- ⊗ Planning meet ups

5.4 Risks

- ⊗ Child gets hurt (e.g. falls out of a tree; take first aid kit)
- ⊗ Inclement weather (take appropriate clothing)
- ⊗ No one else shows up (this only happened once! We had fun in nature anyway)
- ⊗ Child gets wet through (common! Take spare clothes and nappies if required)
- ⊗ Child gets hungry (take picnic and hot drink in flask)
- ⊗ Child gets tired (take sleeping device e.g. buggy)
- ⊗ Arrive late and everyone has moved on (take mobile with phone numbers in it)
- ⊗ Child gets bored (have activity up sleeve e.g. hide and seek, crafts, fairy village, songs)
- ⊗ Need to pee (use bush!)
- ⊗ Need to poo (use nappy or use real toilet when available, if not use nature toilet, occasionally child has had accident (smelly but not the end of the world!)).
- ⊗ Feeling excluded (we aim to be inclusive and friendly, we've all been here for the first time once!)

5.5 Elements of the Design

- ⊗ Organisers
- ⊗ Parents
- ⊗ Children
- ⊗ Rotating book with phone numbers and places to visit
- ⊗ Shared vision
- ⊗ Monthly plan

5.6 Functions

- ⊗ Setting culture
- ⊗ Organising location/time of each meet up
- ⊗ Organising activities
- ⊗ Bringing anything required for activity



Picture 3 - NiN up an ancient oak in Chatelherault Park, Lanarkshire (From left to right: Robin, Marissa, Sophia & Heather) August 2010

5.7 Limiting Factors and opportunities

The limiting factors are listed on page 60 of my journal. On p61 I list the opportunities, this analysis helped with the design, particularly of the second tweak.

6. Design

6.1 The Design

1. set up a group.
2. keep a notebook which travels around the group with the phone numbers in it and ideas of places to visit e.g. Mugdock park, Rouken Glen Park.
3. That week's organiser phones someone in group up the night before and they decide where to go (depending on weather plus other commitments). Decide who will phone who to let everyone know where we are going.
4. Meet in arranged place at 10am on Thursdays. If further afield (e.g. Lochwinnoch RSPB nature reserve) meet on train from central station.

6.2 Ethics and Principles in the Design

The ethics apparent in this design are:

Earth care - it is as environmental a group as we could make, we use no heating, and physical structures, no plastic toys, only biodegradable ones (like sticks) and tools; every session details how to get there by public transport.

People care - Also at the core of this group is looking after people - small and large - to nourish us in nature, to promote education, as well as fun and play.

Fair share - It is free to attend NiN which means that there are a good proportion of people from low income families, including single Mums on benefits. Another way of describing the third ethic is:

Setting Limits to Population and Consumption: NiN reduces consumption through:

- 1) Not using any resources to entertain our children (most play groups are in heated halls, with walls, and many plastic toys).
- 2) Showing parents how they can reduce their toy consumption at home (by taking children out to parks more often).
- 3) Being a support network for parents to discuss alternative, environmentally friendly parenting things e.g. real nappies, travelling by public transport etc.
- 4) Parents learn how to get to parts of Glasgow they have never seen before, by public transport. It has therefore helped some parents reduce their car use.

The permaculture principles which NiN involves include:

1. Observe and interact and 2. Use Small and Slow Solutions The incremental design described above demonstrates the use of these principles, with a slow and small solution, and incremental increase. In August 2010 there are 42 people receiving the monthly emails, (though we have never had more than 12 families attend at once). This has been a gradual increase from the initial 6 families being phoned each week.

3. Minimum input maximum output - children decide what they want to play at, and when they want to play. This is a brilliant example of min input, max output - they are learning to be creative. Adults only intervene when necessary - e.g. if there's some 'antisocial behaviour' we might intervene, split them up, talk about it - preferably using NVC (Non-Violent Communication) - perhaps tell a relevant story (e.g. 'don't cry wolf').

4. Stacking - demonstrating NVC - adults spending time in nature - children learning about nature - learning to be creative - food for free - eating (nourishing) and not having to clean up after them! - company for children - company for adults - dissemination of practical tips and advice about permaculture parenting e.g. sharing how to best look after reusable nappies or potty train your child, or deal with teething homeopathically etc etc.

5. Maximise edge - By going to different parks we maximise the likelihood that people will find it easy to come to NiN, at least once or twice a month. This increases the edge in people throughout the city.

Since there are no age limits we increase edge by hopefully attracting the whole family with friends of similar age for all the family (babies, toddler, pre-schoolers, school age, and adults).

The edge between the city and nature - concrete and soil.

Regularly we meet at the river - the edge between the water and the land. (The kids love throwing stones in the river, and paddling in it, and seeing how it changes over time depending on the weather).

After the presentation given at the Human Ecology conference, we had an article written about Nurture in Nature in the Centre for Human Ecology newsletter. This led to an article in the (national and quite expensive) Green Parenting magazine, which was focussed on how to set up your own such group. A few people contacted me afterwards asking how to set one up, from London to Edinburgh. The BBC came to us once to get ideas for a show they were doing on CBeebies (children's BBC). A larger article on nurturing in nature and including our group (with photos) was in the Sunday Herald magazine in 2010. I have even been on Radio Scotland (Friday 20/9/10) talking about it. In summer 2010, one of our regular members moved to Edinburgh and set up her own Nurture in Nature group (with someone I had put her in touch with) called "Let's Go Oot!". All of this is maximising edge with the outside world, increasing people's awareness of the importance of spending time in nature and disseminating that it is really easy too - all you need is a decent set of waterproofs!

6. Guilds - The formation of the nurture in nature guild has been fundamental. It has been fantastic to see how the parents are mutually supportive and that certainly increases stability in the group (NiN goes ahead whether I am there or not, and supportive relationships have formed between other parents). Guilds of all ages getting together for mutual support in our journeys within nature and the city.

7. Cycle nutrients and information - Generally people live in Glasgow. Although at the beginning there were a couple of west end families, these have never come very regularly. There is definitely a Southside focus. The email list I also use for advertising local events such as community film nights on transition topics.

8. Resilience

Once the monthly plan is set up, it does not require a leader. Perhaps no-one will attend and it will be none the weaker. My only concern is someone coming for the first time doesn't manage to find anyone!

9. A single element carries out many functions -

Example 1: an adult who attends NiN has the following functions: parent of own child; looking out for other children; community member to reprimand/cajole other children (e.g. when they aren't listening to own parents); potential story-teller etc; guild and support for other parents; teacher; learner of anything from other members of group e.g. naming trees or Food for Free.

Example 2. a tree can be used to learn the names of trees; can provide food; be an educational tool; be climbed; be a swing or a see-saw; be a shelter from the rain or sun; house a nest for a bird that we watch - or any other myriad creature on it; provide sticks... sticks can be used as swords, pooh sticks,

splashers (in puddles/streams), water pistols (pretend), measuring sticks, knives, forks, poker, fire, making dens, ... All kids love sticks!

10. A single function is served by many elements

Example 1: education is served by:

- ☼ Adults, babies, toddlers, pre-schoolers, school age children and the interactions between same and diverse age groups.
- ☼ Any item in nature from frogs, spawn and tadpoles; birds; trees;
- ☼ Water - rivers, ponds, puddles, rain
- ☼ The weather: to learn through the body about the effects of weather. To feel it, and celebrate it.
- ☼ Celebrations e.g. birthdays, solstice, equinox parties etc.
- ☼ Books (brought to NiN occasionally, e.g. Food for Free or Wildflower guides).
- ☼ Gardening together in the allotment and harvesting together
- ☼ The monthly plan is educational about travel by public transport, and generally about NiN.
- ☼ Travelling by public transport educates people about how easy and fun it is, and shows them different beautiful places that they can get to using more sustainable travel.

11. The Yield is unlimited/Obtain a Yield

Yields from NiN include:

- ☼ Fun, Play
- ☼ Games
- ☼ Mutual support
- ☼ Education:
 - Learning about nature
 - Learning about connected topics e.g. permaculture, washable nappies, homeopathy, herbal remedies, food for free, growing food
 - Learning to love and respect nature
- ☼ Nature connection
- ☼ Using public transport as a family and as a group of families
- ☼ Relaxation
- ☼ Building social skills
- ☼ Happiness and peace (See the John Woodsworth, 2005, quote)
- ☼ Creative expression
- ☼ Exercise (and learning to love it!)
- ☼ Fresh air
- ☼ Low impact, free fun!
- ☼ Food - for free (e.g. brambles, lime leaves) and that grown in the allotment.



Picture 4 - NiN in Queens Park (February 2009) (Left to Right, Top row: Polly, Lola, Luis, Charlie, Polly's Mum, Alan, & Esme, Bottom row: Marrison, Heather, Maya, Sophia, Robin, Kat (and Selke the dog).

7. Implement

It was quite easy to find quite a few people interested in the group. However, there were only 4 regular families that were reliable (including myself). Of course people would take holidays and be ill etc, which sometimes meant that there were only 2 or 3 families.

8. Maintenance: Observation stage 2

- ⊗ The notebook rarely changed hands (out of mine), we always forgot to do it, except when going away, and it sometimes turned out that even when I went away people didn't organise anything. Not every time but quite a few times. This was a little frustrating.
- ⊗ Sometimes we would arrange to meet at a particular time and place (e.g. 10 am at the entrance to a park) we would feel obliged to wait around at an unsuitable place for toddlers whilst waiting for the rest of the Nurture in Nature (NiN) to arrive. Sometimes they didn't come.
- ⊗ More people on the list of people who would like to attend meant a whole evening was spent organising nurture nature for the next day.
- ⊗ My work life started to take off and I was getting busier in the evenings.
- ⊗ Robin started to need to spend more time with other children - once a week didn't seem to be enough.

- ☼ Robin and his friends were approaching 3 years old, the age many children start nursery school in Scotland, but I didn't want to send him to an indoor nursery to play with plastic toys (which I had thus far managed to avoid at home for health-promotion and ethical reasons).
- ☼ Observation on locations continued and better places to meet constantly adjusted and tweaked as we established favourites etc.
- ☼ Observations on times of years and activities also varied over the years. We did regular ceremonies of the Celtic Calendar to mark the changing of the seasons.

9. Evaluate

We held a NiN meeting to discuss how to change what we were doing. We considered setting up an outdoor nursery, but this was too much for us to carry on. Ongoing evaluation included always checking out what was happening and seeing what the children enjoyed most and got the most out of.

10. Tweak 1

Another outdoor meeting was held the next week at nurture in nature. We decided to increase the days and agreed on Mondays and Thursdays. I agreed to get a phone for NiN, to be used solely for NiN, which we could use to text people the night before to tell them where we would be meeting. This would be more expensive, but would save much time.

11. Observation: Stage 3

As more and more people became interested in joining nurture in nature, but some never came. When I would bump into them again they would say that they wanted to come 'please keep me in the loop' but then still never came. This started to become quite expensive as we reached 20 people, texting them 2 times per week: £4/week.

Observation on locations continued and better places to meet constantly adjusted and tweaked as we established favourites etc.

Observations on times of years and activities also varied over the years. We did regular ceremonies of the Celtic Calendar to mark the changing of the seasons.

12. Tweak 2

I attended a workshop at the Secret Garden (bringing with me info and pictures about Nurture in Nature) and found that we do very similar things, and they are accredited by the Care Commission for their education spiral. This was confirmation that we are doing the well.

Evaluation of this phase was difficult as we wanted to continue to be spontaneous with what we would do, hence where we would go, depending on the mood, commitments and the weather... however the text messages were getting very expensive - £2 twice a week, but lots of people weren't coming (but when I asked them if they wanted to be taken off the list they said that they did want to come again some time). To carry on sending text messages, we would have had to start charging people for these texts. In the end we decided that it was more important for nurture nature to be free, and therefore accessible to anyone whatever their income levels - we now have 2 regular single parent families on benefits.

We plan the month in advance and email this to people. We are also able to print out a few copies and take them around with us so new people can get involved in the group. We had to co-write a blurb to go at the beginning of the sheet. And it was difficult at first to work out where we should go and when. Different people have different ideas, e.g. Lorna thinks we would be as well going every time to Linn Park, which is the most wild park in the Southside, whereas Charlie would like to go to as many different parks as possible. A balance was clearly required. After several months asking everyone where they wanted to go and when, and finding that people didn't actually really care!

We came up with a routine design which is this:

Two times each month to Pollok, Linn and Queens Parks: once on a Monday and once on a Thursday (enabling people who only come one day a week because of work commitments to have the variety of parks), giving 6 regular park visits. We have one visit per month to a different Glasgow park (e.g. Rouken Glen or King's Park); and one trip per month where we meet at a central train station and travel together out of town (e.g. to the beach).

This has made planning each month much easier, and asking for suggestions easier too - reducing the amount of questions to answer. This now saves a lot of time and energy compared to the initial design. Now we even have our favourite places to meet worked out it is easy and only takes about half an hour per month to organise it. Of course we sometimes spend a bit longer, for example if it is a child's birthday or winter/summer solstice etc someone might spend some time organising that particular session.

All plans include how to get there by public transport, and a little encouragement to use it, though no obligation.

13. Reflections & Tweak 3 – Dec 2010

Picture 5 - Feeling the power of the waterfall at Fairlie (Lusi and Luis, July 2010)

13.1 What has gone well in the last year of nurture in nature?

- ☺ I love it! Passionate about it.
- ☺ Some days had lots of people there
- ☺ Lots of interest from new people
- ☺ Good article in newspaper
- ☺ New babies at nurture in nature - knowing it will keep on growing.
- ☺ Outdoor nursery in Pollok park has given a child care opportunity for some children which is line with the NiN ethics.
- ☺ Thursdays has had quite a few people coming to it
- ☺ Relaxing and support network for me
- ☺ I love being in nature, especially Linn park, Chatelherault
- ☺ I really miss NiN when I don't go for a couple of weeks (say I miss one Monday, because Danny does Thursdays now, it's a real difference). This is good because it shows how I love it.
- ☺ Great friendships have developed through NiN. For me in the last year I have become closer to some other Mums.
- ☺ Friendships the children have developed. Especially Luis in the last year, seeing how well he plays with all the other children, even when they are new or quite a different age to him.
- ☺ Being given a massage for all the work I have done at NiN and the Food Coop.
- ☺ Polly was a regular at NiN, but moved to Edinburgh. Here I put her in touch with someone else I had just met, and they have set up a new NiN in Edinburgh called 'Let's Go Ooot!' and they link it into Leith's Transition website.
- ☺ Anna had a baby and was back at NiN within a couple of weeks! She can't stay away (she was new this year).
- ☺ The connections that are made between others, e.g. I introduced Kat and Karen through NiN. This encouraged Karen to move into a forest in Galloway. Now Kat is planning to move to same forest.
- ☺ A nice African lady and her 3 kids came a few times.
- ☺ The waterfall at Fairlie
- ☺ Nature connection course confirmed that NiN is doing it about right for children up to about age 7 (so it's still good for Robin).
- ☺ Nature Connection course gave me some ideas for activities e.g. making fairy houses, also songs.

13.2 What has been difficult / challenging?

- ⊖ Lots of people on mailing list have never come, or only came once.
- ⊖ First person to be asked to be taken off the list was very recently: someone I had connected with on the phone (but she had never come, she's a Westender and I so don't really blame her).
- ⊖ Having what feels like enough people at nurture in nature. A lot of times these days it is just 4 families and Robin doesn't really play with any of them (not like he does, say Heather).
- ⊖ Mondays have had less people coming to NiN. Makes me wonder why? Is it me? Is it the timing? Would afternoons suit better?
- ⊖ Still not as keen on Pollok Park!
- ⊖ The facebook fall out!
- ⊖ Someone in group appears to be advertising NiN on a new website which is very commercial and not describing NiN accurately (she has only been a few times and is always really late, so hasn't got the gist of NiN yet).
- ⊖ We don't have a set routine at NiN which makes it difficult to remember to include singing. I tried to include it as a routine around lunch time (because that is when most people are there: the early birds stay and the late birds have usually got there), but this didn't sustain itself.
- ⊖ Charlie no longer comes to NiN (except in the summer hols, and even then he was never there at 10am, rarely gets there before 12, though he has to leave at 12.30!).

Picture 6 - NiN Winter Solstice Party, December 2010, eating around a fire in our allotment (Left to Right: Robin, Luis, Sophia & Marissa).

13.3 What are my long term goals?

- ⊙ To have a thriving NiN that is accessible to all, with about 12 families attending most weeks.
- ⊙ For us all to learn more about nature, and how we can use it (e.g. Food for Free, art etc).
- ⊙ For all attendees to have fun
- ⊙ For relationships to develop between people and nature.
- ⊙ Develop a sense of place which includes nature, for all the children.

13.4 What are my next achievable steps?

- ⊙ Design another tweak.
- ⊙ Survey other parents - what do they think about changing the times on Mondays to 12.30pm start?
- ⊙ Have new design in place for January.

13.5 My next Tweak

Tweak 3, includes the following changes:

- ✓ Change Monday's meet-up time to a 12.30 start (because Charlie doesn't come much any more; it will make it easier for some people to come including people with: nursery in the mornings; Spanish playgroup on Monday mornings; young babies - thus increasing edge.
- ✓ Re-writing the blurb at the start of the monthly plan to include a 'to bring' list and the risks section above (to allay people's fears for those who have never come.

14. Appendices

14.1 Example of a monthly plan

Nurture in Nature - August 2010

This is an ad-hoc group of parents and children who think that it is really important for children to spend quality time in nature, whatever the weather, playing without toys but with each other (and whatever nature things they can find), at little or no cost to their parents. Parents sometimes organise stories or other activities, but the children are always spontaneously creative. We always aim to meet at 10am (though we are often late). There is no compulsion to come every time, but the more the merrier, and the more often the deeper the friendships develop. Also, one thing which Nurture in Nature has given to people is showing them how easy it is to get to beautiful green places in Glasgow by public transport, and we use it whenever we can. If you want to check details or arrival times, you can phone 423 2678, or text Lusi on 07787376475 (Mondays), Danny on 07900134465 (Thursdays) or Lorna on 561 2920.

	1 st Week	2 nd Week	3 rd Week	4 th Week	5 th Week
M o n d a y	2 nd : Lunasa (start of harvest) celebration in Linn Park. Bring harvest to share. Meet at the white halfpenny bridge. Catch the bus 44 or 66 to Netherlee	9 th : King's Park, near entrance from Menock Road, near to King's Park railway station. (bus 5 goes nearby along Carmunnock Road, then cut through park)	16 th : Pollok Park cricket field. Go into park at Pollokshaws West train station entrance. Turn left after the arch. Cricket field is next to the tennis courts.	23 rd : Queen's Park at the Rose Garden near to Langside Avenue. Catch any bus to Shawlands (e.g. 38, 57)	30 th : Chatelherault country park. Catch the 9.57 train from central station to Chatelherault. Meet on train
T h u r s d a y	5 th : Queens Park at the allotment, entrance just behind the white portacabin. Uphill from Queens Park Train station.	12 th : Linn Park. Meet at the white halfpenny bridge. Catch the bus 44 or 66 to Netherlee	19 th : 9:45 Train from Central to Ardrossan South Beach or Fairlie Fairy Glen (beach if sunny - glen if windy/wet). Meet on train (likely platform 14).	26 th : Pollok Park cricket field. Go into park at Pollokshaws West train station entrance. Turn left after the arch. Cricket field is next to the tennis courts.	

14.2 Article Written by Lusi for the CHE newsletter June 2008

At birth we are connected to nature's rhythms, and our soul is connected to the Spirit (God or whatever you call it), yet through regular interruptions from adults and being shown that our intuitions and instincts are not 'right' we are systematically disconnected more and more.

Many adults spend so many years trying to reconnect with nature in order to help them to heal. These retreats are so healing physically, emotionally and psychologically. Yet surely, if only we could remain connected to nature from the outset, it would be much easier to remain connected throughout our lives?

So how can we ensure that the next generation stay as connected to nature as possible? Clearly, living in a flat with no garden in the centre of a city is not the womb of Mother Nature. In order to allow my son to 'just be' in nature with his friends whatever the weather, since he was 10 months old (2 years ago) I have phoned some friends and friends of friends every week, and we all meet up in parks, allotments, and gardens in the city. Our children's ages range from 12 weeks to 4 years. Every week we meet in different places, and we do different activities, from walking to tree-climbing; from story-telling to mask-making; from planting seeds, to harvesting potatoes, cooking them on a wood fire and eating them together. I observed in my ecopsychology studies that there was no better way of connecting to nature than actually eating her products and sitting with knowing she is inside me.

We have no predetermined structure to the day, there's often someone who is an hour late, but that doesn't interrupt the aims of just allowing the children to be at one with themselves, each other and nature. Clearly some things are not allowed (e.g. hitting) but time spent reprimanding and controlling is minimalized. Some people have to go home after an hour, others stay all day. Our horizons are wide, we would love to extend it to more children, more days and less adults but this means money and regulations and we won't forfeit our ideals of children staying outdoors whatever the weather, surrounded by mother nature, learning about her cycles by observation, and not books; learning about being at one with nature before they have forgotten.

If any other parents of young children are interested in sharing ideas, experiences, articles, books, and even becoming 'critical friends', I would love to hear from you. Perhaps we could even set up a separate email exchange group of CHE-parents?

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14.3 Sunday Herald Article: "Helping kids to Play Outdoors"

By Vicky Allan: 29 Jun 2010

Few of today's children enjoy the carefree, roaming, outdoor days that previous generations did.

But change is on the way ...

to Grace Lamont, her friends, and her peers, once the woods of Castlemilk Park in Glasgow belonged to them and their free-wheeling imaginations. Growing up in the tenements close by, they treated them as their own adventure playground, congregating there, roaming from bridge to burn to waterfall. Although they didn't have much in the way of toys, they didn't need them: the outdoors exercised their bodies and minds. That was 40 years ago. Now those woods are empty, lost to infant imaginations, out of public use as a recreational

ground. When Lamont and her colleagues at the Jeely Piece Club, a children's centre and nursery, proposed trips taking children from the area out into those woods, they found that many locals hadn't even heard of Castlemilk Park. "People," she says, "who have been living right up against it for 20 or 30 years had never known it was a public park."

Lamont has thought long and hard about why the woods of her childhood have been deserted. Fear, she says, is at the root of it: "I think the drug culture and alcoholism kind of scared everyone away and people started to think it wasn't safe to play in that environment. People feel safer indoors. Plus, parents aren't as available as they used to be. They go back to work or education." There is, therefore, a generation of parents who never played in the woods and see no reason for their children to do so.

Many of the children Lamont sees there have never been in a wood before: "Some of them are a bit cautious, anxious. But once we get them involved they forget that initial fear. They're excited, taking in the beauty of it all."

Castlemilk Park is just one of many lost nature playgrounds. Research by the organisation Playday suggests that 71% of parents used to play outdoors near the home, compared to 21% of children today.

There are hundreds of patches of woodland all across Scotland now barely visited by the young. Lamont is part of a movement to lead the children back into them: one that is growing and diverse.

Far from being a fringe activity of a small group of tree-huggers, it is in fact one of the faces of future mainstream childcare. Government policy supports it through the Curriculum for Excellence. The Forestry Commission has started a series of forest kindergartens in local authority nurseries. Countryside ranger Karen Dobbins takes children from St Paul's nursery in Hamilton into nearby Backmuir Woods, where activities include "exploring wild areas, tree-climbing, mini-beast hunts, shelter-building and woodland art".

The movement is also supported by a growing section of parents. Troubled by their children's lack of contact with the outdoors, and the "cotton-wool" nature of most childcare, they are setting up outdoor nurseries and playgroups as part of a backlash against paranoid parenting and a desire to get them away from the living room couch.

It is midday on a Monday and the midsummer sun dapples the woodland floor of Glasgow's Linn Park. An hour into a session of the outdoor playgroup, **Nurture In Nature**, and it seems as though the participants have dispersed, all to their separate whims. A semi-circle of parents sits on a ring of tree stumps and chats as they picnic. Meanwhile, on a patch of meadow nearby, a small group of children and toddlers are gathered, seemingly unsupervised by adults. It seems, in this idyll, that there are no rules and the gentle anarchy known as free play is the only guiding principle. If there is a leader here, it is Robin Alderslowe, a five-year-old expert in the identification and consumption of nettles.

Nurture In Nature was created by Robin's mother, **Lusi Alderslowe**, who, when her boy was nine months old, decided she needed some other regular activity and a way to meet fellow mothers. Alderslowe, who had studied ecopsychology, immediately realised that she wanted to spend time outside. "I knew nature nourished me and I realised this was something I really wanted for my children," she says.

Like most of those working with nature and early years' education, she believes in the virtues of free play and letting the children lead the way. This idea isn't just a romantic notion: it's a sound, practical one which informs much of the nature-based education in Britain and is at the root of Scandinavian outdoor kindergartens. Anyone who has watched children in a natural setting will know the issue is a no-brainer: for most kids, getting out in the mud and rain is a good thing. With my own two small children, I quickly discovered that if I put them on

a beach, in a meadow or a wood, whatever the weather, they would find endless entertainment. Enclose them in four walls with a trove of toys and there will be blood, squeals and tears – probably mine.

The idea that our children have become too disconnected from nature has been gathering force over the past decade. In 2005, the American author, Richard Louv, in his book, *Last Child In The Woods*, even gave us a diagnosis: nature deficit disorder. Louv's extensive fact-gathering has brought together research on the health benefits of contact with greenery, the increased concentration levels of children outside all day, and the positive role of unstructured play, indoors and outdoors, in their development.

In Scotland the attempts to reconnect child and nature started only three years ago, when a couple of pioneering outdoor nurseries were set up in Scotland based on the Scandinavian model: first came Mindstretchers in Perthshire, then the Secret Garden in Fife, where children spent the entire day outside. Louv and the people behind these institutions believe that children not only need to get outdoors – a message that has already been widely accepted if not practised in our culture – but need to be exposed to the wildness of nature. Mindstretchers founder Claire Warden notes that in Britain we are gradually moving to a more naturalistic model of childcare: "In the past 10 years, people have been saying 'Let's get outside the back door.' Now it's 'We want to go outside, but we want nature in here too.'"

Tracie B Wilde believes that her daughter, Willow, had nature deficit disorder. They started coming to Nurture in Nature when she was 13 months old. Until then, Wilde had been what she describes as a "Costa mammy", breastfeeding in coffee shops, living the more mainstream life of a contemporary new mother. She and her family would often go out to parks for a walk. "Willow was over-stimulated," she says, "and I noticed when we got outdoors that her breathing slowed down." Before she came to Nurture And Nature, says Wilde, she knew that nature was important but she had somehow become disconnected from it. Though the belief was in her head, the feeling wasn't.

Wilde, who gave birth to Willow in a birthing pool in a Gorbals highrise, is concerned that the idea of connecting with nature can seem elitist. "I would dearly love for it to be accessible to all and I think it will be one day," she says. "I think the consciousness of getting kids to nature has awakened among the middle class. But you talk to someone from the scheme and they say, 'What would you do if it was raining?' or 'Wouldn't they get dirty?'. If I see a stressed-out mummy, I just want to give her a hug and say, 'Come on, come with me, see my world. There's no need for reprimands and there's no need for any of that because the kids are in their natural place.'"

Most of the parents and workers pushing the movement forward are middle class: they belong to a hillwalking, camping section of the population who already feel they have some ownership of the wider countryside. As Warden puts it: "Childcare in nature fits in with the green agenda. At the moment it's quite trendy to be outdoors, to rewild childhood." She has, she says, worked with 17-year-old parents on low incomes, and has noticed a very different picture: "They themselves haven't had that experience of freedom in nature. For them a lot of their experiences would have been about being taken to a shopping mall."

But the issue is not simply a demographic or geographic one. When I started working on this article, I did think it was the children who lived in the cities who needed the back-to-the-woods movement, particularly those in deprived areas without middle-class parents keen to ferry them out to the green spaces for a regular booster shot of nature.

However, I came across a revealing statistic from the US that showed rural children spent more time indoors than their urban peers. There are no comparable figures for the UK, but those who live in rural areas of Scotland echo this observation. Cathy Bache, who runs the Secret Nursery in Fife, talks of how empty the wood at the back of her village, Letham, has been in recent years.

"When I was a kid, we had a wood like that behind us and all the kids in the street were in the wood. But now it's very rare that children play in those woods. So much so that we're starting a woodland group on a Sunday afternoon to try to encourage children to use the woods."

This issue, therefore, is relevant to us all. Why has this happened? Without a doubt "stranger danger" has been a factor. The risk from cars has kept children off the roads. But perhaps more relevant has been the lure of the screen: it's easier to stay indoors and clamber across the remote control than climb a tree. "Even my own young children didn't play in the woods like I did," says Bache. "They got addicted to screens. The shame is that so many children nowadays don't even know they've missed something because they've never had it."

The result is that the disconnection from nature has almost evolved into something more nebulous. It is the fear of the unknown, the place that no-one goes and no-one really knows about, where anything might happen, where all manner of wolves might lurk. It is also a niggling fear of small discomforts, getting wet, dirty, scratched and cold. Lindsay Brown, whose son goes to the Woodland Kindergarten in Glasgow's Pollok Park, recalls that at the end of his son's first day he rejoiced in the fact that he was muddy. "I think he liked the whole idea of the camp and making things with sticks," says Brown. "But mostly it was that he got dirty."

The wind of change is already whistling through our woods. When, two years ago, I visited Secret Garden's Cathy Bache at her home in Fife, the nursery seemed another radical idea probably destined to remain on the fringe. Now, however, nature seems to have crept in some small way into many mainstream nurseries. Bache has been inundated with people interested in starting similar institutions.

Debbie Simmers, who runs the Woodland Kindergarten, was inspired by Bache. She recalls how, in 2008, her mother showed her an article on the Secret Garden. It appealed to her as offering her child something more like her own childhood, which was spent, mostly, playing with her friends in the back garden and lane behind her home.

Not so long ago, children would have been pushed out their back doors to find their own way to nature or some other form of fun. These days, they are being gently led there by rangers, carers and play leaders. In comparison with the old method, the current one may seem a little too contrived and hyper-vigilant, but these gestures are better than nothing. They are better than leaving another generation to grow up not knowing what it feels like to climb a tree or get stung by a nettle.

Even if today's children don't get to roam wild like the child packs of yore, at least they will get to know and touch their countryside. As Bache puts it, "It's very subversive, I think, because it gets them in their early years, and then the schools have to change because they're taking in all these children who have been outdoors."

"What they do at this age is there with them for the rest of their lives."

14.4 Nurture in Nature Powerpoint Presentation with pictures